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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with adolescents (age 10-18) and with one parent of each to determine whether differences between parents and their adolescent children on political information and news media use had any impact at all on the amount of discussion about politics that goes on between them. The period during which the data were collected was one of intense and increasing political activity during the first half of the 1980 presidential primary session. Accordingly, the questionnaire included many items concerning the respondents' knowledge about political candidates, political parties and issues, their feelings about and preferences for various candidates, and their positions on political issues. In almost all instances, both parent and adolescent were asked the same questions, enabling comparisons of parent and adolescent. Results show that parent-adolescent political discussion does seem to relate to individual parent and adolescent levels of political information and public affairs mass media use. Although it was predicted that similarity in amount of political information and store of images from the mass media, and simple similarity in habits, would affect the amount of discussion between the two, the results seem to indicate that such factors may be at best secondary to other aspects of family dynamics. (HOD)

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PARENT-ADOLESCENT SIMILARITY OF NEWS MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL INFORMATION AS PREDICTORS OF POLITICAL DISCUSSION

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AND POLITICAL INFORMATION AS PREDICTORS
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DISCUSSION AND SOCIALIZATION

Parents have long been assumed to be the major source of their children's political socialization. This assumption derives rather directly from general considerations of socialization and family life. Turner writes, for example, that "socialization is an aspect of interaction in all groups; but the continuity, intensity, and priority of family life make it the most crucial locus of socialization."[1]

However, much research in recent years has called this assumption into question, at least for political matters. Correlations between parent and child on a given attitude or political belief, except for party identification, have been found to be quite low,[2] and there is evidence that even this similarity is declining.[3]

Beck[4] points out that there are three prerequisites for influence by a socialization agent: exposure, receptivity and communication. Communication in this context refers to the assumption that in order for the parent to influence the child, at least some of the content of their interaction must be relevant to, in this case, politics. When looking for the effects of families on political socialization, one might expect that such effects will be greater where the socialization "agenda," whether planned or not, contains politics. A major manifestation of this sort of family emphasis would be found in the amount of political discussion that occurs in the home. It seems clear that families can differ widely in the amount and types of political discussion they permit, encourage or engage in.

The amount and kinds of such interaction depend to a large degree, it would seem, on what each of the participants brings to the interaction. These characteristics would include such factors as interest in politics, information, conversational skills, specific attitudes and mass media use, among others. This paper will look especially at the levels of news media use and the political information of the parent and adolescent and how these factors may affect political communication in the home.

EQUALITY AND DISCUSSION

Individual characteristics are important because, when placed in relationship with each other, they condition the nature of the interactions that can take place between individuals. This consideration has prompted Chaffee[5] to note that "likes talk to likes," meaning that people who have something in common are more likely to enter into conversations than those who do not.

News media use and level of political knowledge can both be considered measures of political involvement, and as such, depending upon their levels in each member of the interacting dyad, could condition the discussions that are possible between them. Given that "likes talk to likes," one might predict that approximate equality of public affairs media use or political information would facilitate political discussions since both parties enter the interaction as relative equals.

Support for this proposition comes from a number of directions of research. Rogers has proposed that the relational concepts of "homophily" and "heterophily" can be used as a dimension along which much research in communication can be organized. According to Rogers,

> "One of the most obvious and fundamental principles of human communication is that the transfer of ideas most frequently occurs between a source and a receiver who have certain similarities. Homophily is the word that has been devised to describe the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar in certain attributes, like beliefs, values, education, social status, etc."[6]

Related work is that in which similarity on some dimension is found to be associated with interpersonal attraction and friendship.[7] Byrne writes that "any time that another person offers us validation by indicating that his percepts and concepts are congruent with ours, it constitutes a rewarding interaction, and hence, one element in forming a positive relationship."[8] This circumstance may be particularly important in a parent-child relationship, because such validation is something that children look for from their parents.

A similar analysis is offered by Triandis. He suggests that a circular relationship exists in a dyad, such that if the members are "cognitively similar" in that they "orient towards significant aspects of their environment in similar ways," communication between them should be effective. The relationship therefore should be rewarding, and the interaction should lead them to like each other more. Then, "increased liking should result in higher rates of interaction...and this, in turn, should produce greater cognitive similarity, thus starting the cycle all over again."[9]

An example of "likes talking to likes" is provided in a study by Carter and Chaffee.[10] They found that people with a college education were more likely than those without a college degree to obtain information about local school activities through direct interaction with school officials -- teachers, principals, school board members. These people were homophilous, at least on education, with the school personnel and could be assured that the interaction would be less threatening and more productive than could those with less education.

The topic of the current study concerns family interactions in which it is difficult to end the relationship if the cost-benefit ratio is unfavorable. However, Thibaut and Kelley suggest that another response is to circumscribe the relationship such that those interactions that are likely to be costly to one or both of the interactants will simply be avoided. Thus, topics, conditions or situations of interaction that are likely to provide "chronically unfavorable reward-cost positions" to members of a dyad are likely to be eliminated from a relationship.[11]

Carter[12] found, in support of this proposition, that husbands and wives were more likely to discuss local schools when they were of about the same age and education, than if they were rather dissimilar on these variables. One might expect in this situation that the differences in age and education carry with them implied differences in knowledge, experience and status which cause the interaction to be embarrassing or difficult for the younger, less education or lower status member of the dyad. Or, conversely, the more educated, older or higher status individual may find the interactions to be uninteresting, or not stimulating enough to be worth the effort. Thus the interactions are avoided.

The overriding concern here is the degree of similarity among the family members and its impact on their conversations. If the similarity is high, this might be expected to set up interaction patterns that are rewarding and nonthreatening. If similarity is low, the interactions patterns might be the opposite in their effects.

It appears that the mass media could play a significant role in this process. Schudson argues that the mass media have "democratized" conversation between children and adults.

> Film and television have made a common culture available to children who partake of it as equals with adults. Indeed, children are often well ahead of adults in their knowledge of the culture of the media. This has surely hastened the demise of the rule that children are to be seen and not heard. Children are simply more competent than they once were to participate in many of the conversations that adults enjoy.[13]

It is commonly found that public affairs media increase the political knowledge of their users. This research finding, however, is much stronger and clearer for the use of newspapers than for television. Most studies have shown television use for public affairs information to be only moderately, slightly or not at all related to political knowledge.[14]

The conclusion to be reached is probably that newspaper use, or newspaper and television use combined, has a positive impact on political knowledge. The effect of television use by itself, on the other hand, is much less. Thus, one can generalize that, depending on the "media mix," public affairs

media use does have the effect of increasing the user's level of political knowledge[15] and could potentially serve as information "equalizers" for parents and their children.

Also, a major theme of research in recent years has been the complementary nature of interpersonal and mass communication.[16] A major thrust of this research has been that mass media use seems to increase interpersonal communication. For example, Lull notes that one function of general television viewing may be that of "communication facilitation" -- giving children characters, stories, themes and images to use as illustrators in their conversations. "Television examples are used by children to explain to each other and to their parents and teachers those real-world experiences, emotions, and beliefs which are difficult to make interpersonally transparent in attempts at verbal communication."[17]

An observational study of television commercials by Reid and Frazer[18] found that some cue on television quite often would prompt the child or parent to begin a conversation that would lead in directions completely unrelated to the topic of the television message.

The conclusion to be reached here is that the steady stream of images, characters and themes on television can result in a large number of common referents for use in conversation between parents and their children. Although the examples given do not bear directly on the news media, it seems that the effects and processes described here are generalizable to situations in which the parent and child are watching the evening news together or in which the parent calls the child's attention (or vice versa) to something in the newspaper, and a discussion ensues.

Given all these considerations, it seems that a case can be made for a significant effect of the news media and political information on the frequency of interpersonal interaction about politics in the home. Equal levels of information, from whatever sources, might predict greater levels of such discussion. Equal levels of news media use, by potentially equalizing information levels and by providing both parent and child with the same set of images, actors, events and themes about politics, could also lead to more interpersonal discussion in the family.

METHOD

Data

The data used to test this hypothesis were gathered during February and March of 1980, the first wave of what became a three-wave panel design, the purpose of which was to study political socialization of adolescents. The professional staff of the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory administered all data collection and coding under a grant from the National Science Foundation to Professors Steven Chaffee, then of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, now of Stanford University, Jack Dennis of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and David O. Sears of the University of California-Los Angeles.[19]

The population represented in these samples is composed of adolescents (age 10-18) and one parent of each. The interviews were obtained with the adolescent first, with the parent interviewed at a later date and independently of the adolescent interview. Respondents were selected by random-digit telephone techniques from all over the state of Wisconsin. Parents in two-parent homes were sampled randomly, and geographical distribution was spread proportionately across Wisconsin by the random-digit dialing procedures.

These procedures resulted in 718 parent-adolescent pairs. The age of the parents ranged from 27 to 69, with a median of 41 years. Education was somewhat above the national average; 53 percent had completed high school and another 32 percent had attended college. Of the adolescents, 48 percent were female. Because more children of broken homes live with the mother, 57 percent of the parents were female.

The period during which these data were collected was one of intense and increasing political activity during the first half of the 1980 presidential primary season. Accordingly, the questionnaire included many items concerning the respondents' knowledge about political candidates, political parties and issues, their feelings about and preference for various candidates, and their positions on political issues. In almost all instances, both parent and adolescent were asked the same questions, enabling comparisons of parent and adolescent.

Variables

The important variables in this study are relational in nature, requiring that the parent and adolescent measures of the same factor be combined in some fashion. These variables measure the relationship of the parent and adolescent in terms of their public affairs mass media use and political knowledge.

A public affairs mass media use index was created by summing responses to questions concerning the days a week the person reads a newspaper and watches national news on television, the number of magazine articles about national politics the person had read during the previous week, and the frequency of watching local late evening news and news specials. This was formed for both parent and child.

A political knowledge index was created for both parent and adolescent by summing the number of political candidates the person could name, the number of candidates the respondent could correctly identify by political party, the number of correct associations of political "buzzwords," symbols and persons with political party, and the correct identification of the traditional issue stands of the parties. Missing and "not ascertained" responses were treated as incorrect answers and included in the knowledge indexes.

The relationship between the parent and adolescent for both the public affairs media use and political knowledge variable was operationalized by dividing the parent score by the adolescent score. Values of this ratio that are below 1 signify that the adolescent is greater than the parent on these factors, those scores that are close to a value of 1 mean that the parent and adolescent are about equal, and values above 1 indicate that the parent is greater than the adolescent. Quadratic and cubic forms of these two variables were calculated, along with the linear form.

A parent-adolescent political discussion measure was formed by summing the responses to two questions, actually the same question asked once of the parent and once of the adolescent. Both questions asked the respondents how often they talked about politics with the other, on a four-point scale running from "never" to "a lot."

The final variable in these analyses was the adolescent's age.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis to be tested in this study is that the parent-adolescent ratios on public affairs media use and political knowledge will predict parent-adolescent discussion. Specifically, discussion will be more likely when the parent and adolescent are approximately equal on these variables.

This is in part a replication of the previously cited work by Carter and Carter and Chaffee on the hypothesis that "likes talk to likes," or that similarity on a relevant variable increases the chances of interaction between members of a dyad. While Carter was working with husband-wife pairs, and Carter and Chaffee examined the interactions between adults and school officials, the research described here seeks to extend this analysis to parent-adolescent pairs. It also looks at public affairs media use and political knowledge levels as the variables on which similarity might promote discussion.

Analysis

The analyses take the form of multiple, hierarchical regressions. As the first step, two separate regression analyses were conducted, one with the public affairs media use ratios forming the independent variable, and another with the political knowledge ratios forming the independent variable of interest. Another regression was then conducted with both media use and knowledge ratios as predictors.

While the hypothesis is specifically focused on the relationship between parent and adolescent media use and knowledge, it is likely that the individual levels of these variables may be important predictors of parent-adolescent discussion. It is also quite possible that the influence of these relational variables may overlap to a considerable degree with the individual levels of these indexes. The individual levels may, in fact, suppress any relationship that exists between these dependent variables and the parent-adolescent ratios. Therefore, these analyses require that the effects of the individual levels

of political knowledge and public affairs media use be accounted for first to see if there are separate and additional effects of the differences between parent and adolescent in mass media use and knowledge.

Support for the hypothesis would be found if there are positive and significant betas for the quadratic form of the parent-adolescent knowledge and media use ratios, i.e., for $\left(\frac{\text{Parent Knowledge}}{\text{Adolescent Knowledge}}\right)^2$ and $\left(\frac{\text{Parent media use}}{\text{Adolescent media use}}\right)^2$. Given the way these variables are computed, they are not expected to vary in a linear fashion with parent-adolescent discussion. Rather, discussion should increase as the ratios' values approach 1 and then decline as they increase above 1.

RESULTS

The results of these analyses are shown in Tables 1-3. Table 1 shows the relationship to discussion of parent and adolescent levels of political knowledge, as well as the parent-adolescent ratios on this variable. The first variable entered in this hierarchical analysis was the adolescent's age. The second block of predictors consisted of the parent and adolescent levels of political knowledge, followed in the third block by the parent-adolescent knowledge levels in linear, quadratic and cubic forms. The final group of variables entered included adolescent age by knowledge ratio interactions.

It is plain from Table 1 that the only significant predictors of parent-adolescent discussion -- of the variables included here -- are the parent and child individual knowledge levels. They are similar in their predictive strength and together account for most of the 12 percent of the variance in discussion accounted for by this overall model. The parent adolescent knowledge ratios add nothing to the predictive power of this model, either alone, or in interaction with the adolescent's age.

Table 2 shows a similar story for public affairs media use. The plan of the hierarchical regression was the same as in the previous analysis. The adolescent's age was entered first, followed by parent and adolescent public affairs media use, added as a block. Then came the parent-adolescent media use ratios in linear, quadratic and cubic form, followed by interaction terms representing adolescent's age by media use ratios.

The results of this analysis are identical to those shown in Table 2, the only significant predictors being parent and adolescent public affairs mass media use. Again, there are no effects of any of the parent-adolescent ratios or interactions. Total variance accounted for reaches 16 percent.

A final look at this hypothesis is provided in Table 3. This table shows the results of a regression which includes both media use and political knowledge levels of parent and adolescent. Since the parent-adolescent ratios were of no consequence in the previous analyses, they were excluded from this analysis. This was a hierarchical approach again, with the adolescent's age added first, with parent and adolescent values on political knowledge and media use included next. The final step consisted of interactions between parent and adolescent media use, parent and adolescent political knowledge, the adolescent's knowledge and media use, and interactions of the adolescent's age with his or her knowledge and media use.

Table 1

Multiple Regression: Parent-Adolescent Discussion with Political Knowledge Independent Variables and Interactions (N= 716)

Independent Variables	Simple r	Beta	F	R^2 Change
Main Effects				
Adolescent's Age	.06	-.02	.18	-
Parent's Political Knowledge	.28	.21	13.90[a]	.08
Adolescent's Political Knowledge	.26	.24	11.68[a]	.04
Parent-Adolescent Knowledge Ratio (Linear)	-.06	.20	.57	-
Parent-Adolescent Knowledge Ratio (Quadratic)	-.04	-.58	.95	-
Parent-Adolescent Knowledge Ratio (Cubic)	-.02	.41	1.04	-
Interactions				
Adolescent Age x Parent-Adolescent Knowledge Ratio (Linear)	.02	1.01	1.58	-
Adolescent Age x Parent-Adolescent Knowledge Ratio (Quadratic)	.02	.11	.20	-
Adolescent Age x Parent-Adolescent Knowledge Ratio (Cubic)	.02	-.80	.79	-

Total Variance Accounted for = 12%

[a] $p < .01$

Table 2

Multiple Regression: Parent-Adolescent Discussion with News Media Use Independent Variables and Interactions (N = 680)

Independent Variables	Simple r	Beta	F	R^2 Change
Main Effects				
Adolescent's Age	.05	-.03	.86	
Parent's Media Use	.25	.23	6.49[a]	.06
Adolescent's Media Use	.3[illegible]	.22	3.44[a]	.03
Parent-Adolescent Media Use Ratio (Linear)	-.20	-.14	.11	-
Parent-Adolescent Media Use Ratio (Quadratic)	-.18	.05	.01	-
Parent-Adolescent Media Use Ratio (Cubic)	-.14	-.05	.03	-
Interactions				
Adolescent Age x Parent-Adolescent Media Use Ratio (Linear)	.08	.68	.52	-
Adolescent Age x Parent-Adolescent Media Use Ratio (Quadratic)	.03	.14	.27	-
Adolescent Age x Parent-Adolescent Media Use Ratio (Cubic)	.07	-.65	.60	-

Total Variance Accounted for = 16%

[a] $p < .01$

Table 3

Multiple Regression: Parent-Adolescent Discussion with Media Use and Political Knowledge Main Effects and Interactions, without Parent-Adolescent Ratios (N = 680)

Independent Variables	Simple r	Beta	F	R^2 Change
Main Effects				
Adolescent's Age	.05	-.06	2.58	-
Parent's Political Knowledge	.28	.16	17.64[a]	.08
Adolescent's Political Knowledge	.25	.13	11.12[a]	.03
Parent's Media Use	.25	.10	7.11[a]	.02
Adolescent's Media Use	.35	.27	49.35[a]	.06
Interactions				
Parent's Media Use x Adolescent's Media Use	.03	.03	.56	-
Adolescent's Age x Adolescent's Knowledge	.13 .13	.07	3.03[a]	-
Adolescent's Age x Adolescent's Media Use	.06	.00	.00	-
Adolescent's Media Use x Adolescent's Knowledge	.05	-.04	.85	-
Parent's Knowledge x Adolescent's Knowledge	.07	.04	1.04	-

Total Variance Accounted for = 20%

[a] $p < .01$

Table 3 largely repeats what was seen in the previous two tables. There are significant main effects of media use and knowledge for both parent and adolescent on parent-adolescent discussion of politics, and a significant positive interaction between the adolescent's age and his or her political knowledge. This model accounts for 20 percent of the variance in discussion.

DISCUSSION

It seems clear that the only conclusion warranted from this study is support for the null hypothesis: There is no evidence that the differences between parents and their adolescent children on political information and news media use have any impact at all on the amount of discussion about politics that goes on between them. What also seems clear is that the individual levels of these two variables do have an impact. Parent-adolescent political discussion does seem to relate to the parent and adolescent individual levels of political discussion and public affairs mass media use. While not an unimportant finding -- it adds to the recent literature showing a close connection and reciprocity between interpersonal and mass communication -- it does not allow extension of the "likes talk to likes" proposition to the parent-adolescent dyad.

This study was predicated on an assumption about the importance of information -- cognitive factors -- in parent-adolescent relationships. The similarity in amount of political information and store of images from the mass media, and simple similarity in habits, were predicted to affect the amount of discussion between the two. The results of this study seem to indicate that such factors may be at best secondary to other aspects of family dynamics.

Other factors, such as the power relationships and the parental support and affection that are displayed in the home, have been found to be important variables in shaping the nature of family environments.[20] These two factors might be the determinants of parent-adolescent discussion about any topic, including politics. Discussion may indeed be enhanced by equality between discussants on relevant variables, but only if the amount and forms of the support and power relationships in the family are such that parent-adolescent discussion is common and appropriate behavior. Thus, in families where other aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship do not encourage discussion, the equality on these political knowledge and news media measures might make little, if any, difference in their discussion habits. In families where conditions do encourage discussion, the same hypothesis investigated in this study might still be worth investigating.

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